

128 PRINCE BISMARCK AND HIS
MEMOIRS

El, five as Minister at Bucharest, four as Ambassador at Rome—such were the chief stages of an odyssey in which he learned the secrets of the diplomatic art. Such an autobiography could not be dull. In 1897, when the long-expected call to the Wilhelmstrasse arrived, he might well have felt satisfied with his fortune and himself. He had no serious rivals and no dangerous enemies. His qualifications for the post seemed beyond dispute, and the Chancellorship itself lay not far ahead. For Hohenlohe was seventy-eight and the monarch was beginning to look round for a younger man. *Omnium*

consensu capax imperil nisi imperasset.

If it is broadly correct to say that Bismarck's apologia enhanced his reputation, it is equally incontestable that Billow has damaged his own fame beyond repair. From a literary point of view alone are the Memoirs a success. Nowhere else shall we find such a portrait-gallery of Bismarckian and post-Bismarckian Europe. Though a patriotic German he was also something of a cosmopolitan, loving Italy next to his own country, happy in Paris, and mixing with scholars on easy terms. No one can deny the power, the charm, the human interest of the work. Yet from the point of view of the author, one of the vainest of men, it must be pronounced a failure, for it diminished his moral stature in a surprising degree. Many of his portraits, from the Kaiser downwards, have aroused angry protest, but no one has suggested a lack of accuracy in delineating his own features. No friend, no disciple, no biographer could have painted such an intimate portrait, no foe could have revealed to a similar extent his meanness of soul. It is a psychological riddle how so accomplished a man of the world could forget that in discharging his poisoned arrows he was damaging himself more than those he

attacked. The terse
verdict of Francis Joseph on Conrad—" he is
clever but not
wise"—is equally true of the most brilliant
political figure of
his time. Behind the dazzling *façade* we seek in
vain for the
nobler qualities of mind and heart. Suspicions of
his sincerity
were not confined to foreigners like Grey, for his
character was
least admired by some of his closest
collaborators. Kiderlen
called him " the eel" ; Schoen and Jagow
despised him, and
Monts cordially reciprocated his dislike. He
would have been
wiser had he' left his vindication to another
hand ; and, if he
had told his story with less vanity and malice, he
would have
occupied a higher rank among the public figures
of his time
and a warmer place in the hearts of his
countrymen.